

ARTICLE APPEARED
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Soldiers-for-hire do the nation no favor

The dead body was on display in Managua, for journalists to see. It was a light-haired, fair-skinned man — with a bullet hole in his temple.

The victim was a member of Civilian Military Assistance, a group of U.S. military buffs who hail from Alabama, Tennessee, and Mississippi. Many are Vietnam veterans and most are idealists: They want to fight communism in Central America.

Using their own money but with encouragement from U.S. officials, CMA members have given Salvadoran soldiers military equipment and advice. They have also been helping the anti-communists in Nicaragua, the contras.

On Sept. 1, two CMA members — Dana Parker, a Huntsville, Ala., police detective, and James Powell III, a Memphis helicopter pilot — flew from a Honduras base into Nicaragua, where contras were attacking a military school.

CMA supporters say the helicopter was on a "rescue mission." The Nicaraguans say it fired rockets. Whatever it did, it was shot down, and Parker and Powell died.

In a propaganda blitz, Nicaragua charged they were CIA agents. Its official newspaper called them "mercenary assassins" who killed children. Then it complained to the U.N. Security Council.

U.S. officials denied the CIA link, but said that U.S. military officers helped the group contact Salvadoran officers. And in Honduras, a U.S. officer helped CMA members get in touch with anti-Sandinistas in Nicaragua.

The victims' friends say Parker and Powell died for a good cause. The group's leader says many of his men feel guilt about Vietnam and want to fight communism "without ropes on us."

These misguided idealists may not realize it, but many ropes tie their actions to the United States. This incident gives the world the clear impression that Americans are involved in combat operations in Nicaragua — an involvement Congress has never sanctioned or funded, despite earlier U.S. aid to the contras.

Even if well-intentioned, any unauthorized military adventure is foolish and dangerous to U.S. interests.

What if a group of adventurers were captured and held hostage, like the Americans in Tehran? What if some over-enthusiastic jungle fighter were caught committing an atrocity? Or a political assassination?

The result would be, at best, a propaganda bonanza for the Sandinistas and their communist allies, the Cubans. At worst, it could drag the USA into a war. Of all people, American officials should recognize these risks and stop inviting free-lancers to get involved.

Those who call these men heroes have seen too many adventure movies. And any future adventurers naïve enough to see themselves as war heroes should remember that young American in the Managua morgue.